

CIRCULAR LETTER 6

Dear brothers:

1.1 In September 1996, the Order will celebrate a congress with the theme: "The Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Vocation." This congress has already evoked considerable interest in the Order. It has also evoked a few questions and perplexities. Two of the most common questions raised are:

a) "For the past 30 years it has been an important goal of our Order to unite cleric brothers and lay brothers and to erase inequalities between them. Does not this congress militate against these important goals?";

b) "Is it a goal of this congress to define a new image for lay brothers in the Order? If so, what is this image?"

1.2 I wish to reflect with you on some of the concerns which caused the general definitory to convoke this congress and, in the process, offer some response to the questions and perplexities raised.

2.1 I begin my reflections with the General Chapter of 1982 and article 84.3 of the Constitutions approved at that chapter:

"By reason of the same vocation the brothers are equal."

"... *the brothers are equal*" has been a preoccupation of the Order for the past 30 years. While I am sure exceptions exist in fact, equality of the brothers in fraternity is an accomplished fact in law. The only remaining "inequality" refers to the ability of lay brothers to assume offices in our Order. Concerning this matter, we have an ongoing dialogue with the Holy See. However, within our Order and its legislation, no such inequality exists. The positions assumed by the General Chapters of 1982, 1988 and 1994 – with the overwhelming support of the assembled capitulars – are absolutely clear and unequivocal. No congress of the Order is required to ensure the equality of brothers in fraternity and, should that be the focus of the 1996 Congress, I agree that it would tend to be counterproductive.

2.2 The issue of equality tends to overshadow the first part of article 84.3 which, I suggest, is much more important: "By reason of the same vocation ..." This statement is so important that, to give it constant and visible expression in our daily lives, the Constitutions immediately add this phrase: "*For this reason, according to the Rule, Testament and earliest custom of the Capuchins, let all of us be called 'brother' without distinction.*" The forceful and absolutely clear statement in article 84.3 ends years of ambiguity. When I entered the Order in 1959 it was not a clearly accepted principle that all brothers had "the same vocation." Rather, there were two vocations: the vocation to the priesthood and the vocation to the lay brotherhood, existing in one Order. Because of diversity of vocation, there were two novitiates, two recreation rooms, two distinct places in the refectory, and even two distinct chapels. Because of diversity of vocation,

there arose a discussion of the relative importance of each vocation and the inevitable devaluation of the lay calling in our Order. While the Order has undoubtedly overcome the consequences as they apply to the equality of the brothers, it has not reflected in depth on other consequences. I wish to suggest a few.

3.1 The brothers are equal, they are not identical! Cleric brothers and lay brothers have the same vocation, but their different callings in the church and society mean that they have differing experiences of living the same vocation. Each experience brings its own richness to our common vocation. We have but to think of the contribution to our spirituality of St. Lawrence of Brindisi or Bl. Diego José of Cadiz and that of St. Felix of Cantalice or St. Conrad of Parzham. The Constitutions of 1982 represent a marvelous and inspired redefinition of our Capuchin presence in the modern world. They are the result of our return to the spirit of our founder, St. Francis, and a re-appropriation of our early Capuchin traditions. The Constitutions are the result of study and research. However, they are also the result of the shared reflections on the lived experience of brothers from different areas of the world gathered in many general chapters, beginning in 1968, five plenary councils, and many international commission meetings. Because of the consequences of the ambiguities referred to above, lay brothers, by and large, have not shared in these reflections on an international level. There were no lay brothers at the Chapters of 1968, 1970, 1974, 1976 or 1982. There was one lay brother present in 1988 and two in 1994. Participation by lay brothers in plenary councils, although somewhat more consistent, was always completely overshadowed by a great majority of cleric brothers. Therefore, lay brothers have never had an opportunity to reflect on our common Capuchin fraternal life from an international perspective. As a result, the Order as a whole lacks the richness which only such a reflection can offer. It is an important goal of the 1996 congress to offer such an opportunity. The General Chapter of 1982 (where 100% of the participants were cleric brothers), reflected on the fraternal life experience of all the brothers, and was not divisive of the Order. In the same way, the Congress of 1996 (Where 75% of the participants will be lay brothers) will be a congress of the entire Order and reflect on the fraternal life of all the brothers. (It is important to note that this will not be a "Congress of Lay Brothers;" it will be a congress of the entire Order in which lay brothers will constitute the majority of the members!) Far from being a divisive experience, it can only bring enrichment to the lives of all.

3.2 Traditionally, Capuchin cleric brothers have been preachers and confessors, Capuchin lay brothers have been questors and porters and involved in fraternal services. While the Order deeply values the preachers and confessors of our Order, the "image" of the Capuchin cleric has developed far beyond these traditional roles. This development has occurred, not because of a new "definition" of the Capuchin cleric, but rather in response to the needs of the church and society. Rather than giving definition to our ministerial role, our Constitutions define the relationship of these roles with our core values such as fraternity, poverty, minority, etc. Just as the Order continues to value the "traditional image" of cleric brothers even as their roles evolve, so our Order values and will continue to treasure the traditional "image" of our lay brothers even as their roles in the church and society evolve. We are also conscious that the needs of the church and society invite such an evolution in the role of our lay brothers as agents of gospel love in the world. This demands that the Order also encourage our lay brothers to continue to develop their presence and roles in society and in the church beyond the roles traditionally assigned to them. Such a development is already underway. However,

it requires dialogue and reflection. Since there is usually only a small number of lay brothers in each province, it has been very difficult for them to reflect in a serious way on their evolving role in the church and society. The 1996 Congress will not attempt to “define an image” of lay brothers in the Order, but it will offer our lay brothers a unique opportunity to share experiences and reflections across international and continental boundaries. It is hoped that this will have a positive influence upon the development of their presence in the Order, in the church and in society.

3.3 “Since the fraternal gospel life holds the principal place in our calling, let the same religious formation be provided for all brothers ...”(30.2). This essential principle enunciated by our Constitutions should eliminate all distinctions and inequalities during initial formation and give new depth to the religious formation of both cleric brothers and lay brothers. In many areas that is beginning to happen. However, in many circumscriptions, particularly those in which brothers begin studying philosophy and theology immediately after novitiate, the corresponding initial formation of lay brothers effectively comes to an end. Furthermore, serious difficulties still exist on the level of “special formation” of lay brothers.

The church offers a concrete model which all must follow for the special formation of clerics. Therefore, practically every circumscription of the Order can enunciate a serious program for the philosophical, theological and pastoral preparation of those brothers pursuing priestly ministry within the church. This is not the case when we speak of the special or ministerial training of lay brothers. Few provinces can enunciate a clear program for the special formation of lay brothers. In some cases it is simply presumed that lay brothers will dedicate themselves to manual labor. While this is an honoured and precious option within our Order, it is an option which should be discerned and not presumed. Furthermore, those for whom other services and ministries are discerned must be given the special formation necessary and adequate for the service. This question is of vital importance for the entire Order and for the church. If the church is to be an effective instrument of evangelization in the new millennium, it must unlock the evangelizing gifts of the laity. Fraternity – with the consequent equality and unity of cleric brothers and lay brothers – is the foundational charism of our Order. This gives our Order a special responsibility to provide concrete role models to the wider church. This question of the special formation of lay brothers opens still another fruitful area of reflection for the 1996 Congress.

4.1 The 1996 Congress is a moment of grace for the entire Order. I am personally very grateful for this unique opportunity to hear and share the experiences and gospel aspirations of lay brothers from across the world. We cannot expect miracles from a 3-week congress! However, it is my fervent prayer and that of the general definitory that the 1996 Congress will initiate a dialogue within the Order which will deepen our common vocation to live and proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the footprints of our Brother Francis.

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